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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [PHUM](#) [KDEM](#) [IR](#) [RU](#) [AJ](#)  
SUBJECT: CONGRESSMAN WEXLER REVIEWS REGIONAL, DOMESTIC  
POLITICS WITH GOVERNMENT AND OPPOSITION OFFICIALS

Classified By: Charge d'Affaires Donald Lu for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

¶1. (C) Summary: During a January 9 meeting with Congressman Wexler, Deputy Foreign Minister Araz Azimov provided an overview of Azerbaijan's relations with Iran and Russia, suggesting that Azerbaijan would be willing to play a mediating role between the U.S. and Iran. In separate January 9 meetings, Milli Majlis Deputy Chairman Ziyafat Asgarov said that Azerbaijan should do more in reaching out to Congressmen and American Jewish group who often know little about Azerbaijan. Opposition party leaders warned that the GOAJ's tight controls over political freedoms could lead to a new, Islamist opposition. Rep. Wexler also met First Lady Mehriban Aliyeva for an overview of the Heydar Aliyev Foundation and with Semyon Ihilov for a discussion of the historic Mountain Jewish Community. End summary.

¶2. (SBU) On January 9, Congressman Robert Wexler (D-FL) and staffer Joshua Rogin met with First Lady Mehriban Aliyeva, Deputy Foreign Minister Araz Azimov, Milli Majlis Deputy Chairman Ziyafat Asgarov, several political opposition leaders (Ali Kerimli Popular Front Party Chairman; Isa Gambar, Musavat Party Chairman; Lala Shovkat, Azerbaijan Liberal Party Chairwoman; and Eldar Namazov, Yes bloc co-founder), and Mountain Jewish community leader Semyon Ihilov. Azerbaijani Ambassador to the U.S. Yashar Aliyev accompanied Congressman Wexler at all these meetings, except the meeting with opposition leaders. Former Azerbaijan Ambassador to the U.S. and current head of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs Diplomatic Academy Hafiz Pashayev attended the meeting with the First Lady.

First Lady Aliyeva  
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¶3. (SBU) Aliyeva, a Member of Parliament who also serves as President of the Heydar Aliyev Foundation, said the Foundation was established in May 2004 to support projects on environmental, education, health care, and youth issues. Aliyeva stated that the Foundation has constructed approximately 200 new schools, built a center for children with diabetes, and participated in several joint UNESCO and ISESCO projects. Aliyeva said the Heydar Aliyev Foundation works closely with Israeli philanthropist Lev Levayev, including a recent joint project to construct a Jewish school and community center. She observed that Israeli Foreign Minister Livni is also coming to Baku in several days.

Deputy Foreign Minister Araz Azimov  
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14. (C) Deputy Foreign Minister Araz Azimov's comments focused on Iran and Russia. Azimov framed Azerbaijan's concerns about Iran in humanitarian terms. Noting that with a plurality of ethnic Azerbaijanis living in Iran, it will always be important for Azerbaijan to maintain cordial relations with Iran, and he noted an interest on both sides to deepen human-to-human contacts. Azimov also said that he was concerned that the Republic of Azerbaijan would be an attractive target should Iran want to harm U.S. interests. Azimov said that Azerbaijan considers Iran a "dangerous country" which is "unpredictable." Azimov said that U.S. pressure on Iranian President Mahmud Ahmedinejad made him more popular domestically, but at the same time Iran had a very well-developed "street democracy" which could easily result in Ahmedinejad being overthrown in short order under the right circumstances. Azimov stressed that the U.S. should not take any military action against Iran, since the result would be "catastrophic" for the region. Azimov added that Azerbaijan would likely be willing to play a mediation role between Iran and the U.S., stating that Azerbaijan would be willing to host a meeting in Baku for the U.S. and Iran, should the U.S. desire a dialogue.

15. (C) In regard to Russia, Azimov said that Russian's goal was "domination" of the South Caucasus, and that Russia "played this game very well." Azimov questioned the logic of Section 907 of the Freedom Support Act, arguing that the legislation punished Azerbaijan even though it is a good partner of the United States. Armenia, Azimov argued, is a "Russian satellite state" that is rewarded for its behavior. Azimov also noted that he believed Turkey would not move to improve relations with Armenia in the absence of substantive movement on a solution to the Nagorno Karabakh conflict.

Milli Majlis Deputy Chairman  
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16. (C) Deputy Speaker of Parliament Ziyafat Asgarov thanked Wexler for coming and expressed his interest in strengthening the bilateral relationship and ties between the U.S. Congress and the Parliament. Asgarov said Azerbaijan is still a young, democratizing country facing regional pressures from the north and south, yet it is continuing "to develop in all spheres." Asgarov said that Azerbaijan should increase its outreach efforts to Congressmen and American Jewish group who often know little about Azerbaijan. Reflecting on the GOAJ's support to America after September 11, Asgarov said Azerbaijan understands the problem of terrorism, noting that Azerbaijan has been subject to Armenian terrorism and occupation. Asgarov said Nagorno Karabakh and the seven occupied territories are "uncontrolled areas," with terrorist bases and narcotics trade that supply funds for Armenia's military.

Opposition Leaders  
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17. (C) Wexler met with opposition leaders Lala Shovket Hacıyeva, Isa Gambar, Ali Kerimli and Eldar Namazov for almost 90 minutes. Each of the politicians took their turn briefing Wexler on the situation in Azerbaijan, focusing on restrictions on freedom of the press, freedom of speech, and freedom of assembly. They alleged that the GOAJ is working to stifle their fledgling political movements. The party leaders that they were a "democratic" opposition and not an "Islamic" opposition to the government, and as such, it was very important that the United States provide whatever support it could to the democratic development of Azerbaijan. All the leaders said that they were fearful about the increased influences of Islamists and Iranians in Azerbaijan, arguing that if the authoritarian nature of the regime continued, and the democratic opposition continued to whither, the trend would result in strengthened pro-Islamist and pro-Iranian opposition forces.

18. (C) Commenting on recent developments in the region and in Azerbaijan, Gambar said that the strengthening of Russia

and Russian President Putin has emboldened other post-Soviet countries to also be more authoritarian. He said that Russia is copying Azerbaijan in creating a cult of personality around President Putin, the way that Azerbaijan has created one around Heydar Aliyev. Shovket commented that Ilham Aliyev is very insecure, noting that the opposition is, in reality very weak, and that only a "weak, insecure" person would take the kind of draconian measures that Aliyev has taken against the opposition. Shovket also noted that First Lady Mehriban Aliyeva is taking on a role similar to that of the wife of the Shah of Iran in the 1970s, with an increased public profile, managing a foundation which received a large amount of money from oil revenues, and spending a great deal of money.

#### Jewish Community Leader

19. (SBU) Mountain Jewish community leader Semyon Ihilov told Wexler there is no problem with anti-Semitism in Azerbaijan, which has a strong tradition of religious tolerance and inter-confessional cooperation. Ihilov said there were approximately 30,000 Jews in Azerbaijan, but approximately half have left for other countries since 1991. Of Azerbaijan's Jews, 95 percent are mountainous Jews, according to Ihilov. Ihilov also provided a tour of the 62 year-old synagogue for Baku's Mountain Jewish community.

110. (U) Rep. Wexler did not have the opportunity to review this message.

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